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Mayor Menino to install solar panels on his house

By Dan Adams | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 23, 2012



DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The Drydock Center in the Seaport District installed a 2,068-panel solar rooftop system.

Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino has been pushing real estate developers and property owners to make their buildings more energy efficient and environmentally friendly. Now he's going green at home, too: Menino is installing solar panels on the roof of his home to help promote a state program that makes it cheaper for residents to go solar.

"If I'm the mayor of Boston, I should be participating also," Menino said. "We're making sure we're leading by example."

Menino will announce his home solar installation at a ribbon-cutting ceremony Thursday for a major new solar farm installed at the Drydock Center in the Seaport District. The 2,068-panel rooftop system was installed by Broadway Renewable Strategies and is now the second-largest solar array in Boston.

The mayor's house will get its green upgrade this winter as part of the state's Solarize Massachusetts program, in which solar companies absorb much of the hefty cost of installation — \$20,000 or more — with the help of state and federal tax credits. In return, homeowners pay the company for the electricity generated by the panels, similar to how they pay a utility directly.

Menino and his wife, Angela, will pay SolarCity \$500 to install 16 panels that will generate about 5,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity annually. The Meninos will also sign a 20-year contract that locks in their electricity costs at 12 cents a kilowatt-hour ; the current rate from a utility is about 15 cents. At that rate, the Meninos will save about \$8,000 over the 20-year deal, assuming mild increases in market prices for electricity over that time. Currently the mayor's electricity bill is about \$77 a month.

"It'll reduce cost of energy for our home, and it's part of the clean air efforts in Boston," said Menino, one of just 18 Boston property owners to participate in the program so far. "I'm part of the new generation of saving energy, but also having a cleaner world."

Homeowners can lock into lower rates by paying more toward the upfront installation costs. Moreover, officials say solar companies will offer increasingly lower electricity prices as more homeowners participate in the program, giving residents an incentive to encourage their neighbors to go solar.

Solar installations across the state are on the upswing because of plummeting costs for equipment, aggressive government incentives, and financing from installers, said Larry Chretien of the Massachusetts Energy Consumers Alliance. Last year, a typical home solar system cost \$26,000, according to the Massachusetts Clean Energy Center. The figure is now closer to \$21,000 and continues to drop.

“The market has changed dramatically over the last few years,” Chretien said. “There’s been an explosion of companies installing solar. . . . It’s now a fact that a consumer who’s solar-ready can save money.”

Massachusetts currently generates about 129 megawatts of power through commercial and residential solar installations, enough to power more than 20,000 homes, according to the Department of Energy and Environmental Affairs. The state hopes to reach 250 megawatts by 2017, a goal that seems within reach now that costs have come down, Chretien said.

“I’m a middle-class person, and five years ago I couldn’t think of how I could pay for panels on the roof,” he said. “Now, the issue isn’t cost, it’s more the trees over my house.”

The Solarize Mass program is now active in 17 towns and cities, several of which have now signed up enough residents to lower electricity rates to the minimum possible under their contracts with local installers.

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